

**White House Conference on Aging  
Ohio Nutrition Network Solutions Forum**

Columbus, Ohio  
Friday, May 6, 2005

**Statement by:**

Robin Small  
Executive Director  
Henry County Senior Center  
Napoleon, Ohio

Northwestern Ohio, where Henry County is located, is an agricultural county populated mainly by stoic farming families of German descent. Our retired citizens have lived their lives with a strong work ethic and unselfish dedication to the United States when called upon to serve. Our military service organizations (i.e. American Legion, VFW and AMVETS) are very active, and represent our elder men and women who entered the armed services or helped in auxiliary activities.

The emerging generation of retired citizens in our county is a mix of those with deep roots in the county and also new faces brought here by the manufacturing plants built in recent years. These new retirees - more mobile and better acquainted with ideas, services and products from outside our area – are used to having choices and living more diverse lives than the present group of seniors in our area. However, there are basic human needs that will always be a common thread in helping people age successfully. Nutrition and access to attaining basic needs will always be of primary importance to living productive and independent lives. This is true of any age.

From my experiences with seniors today, and emerging seniors (including myself!), I submit the following “solutions” regarding nutrition and the aging:

1. **Policies need to be directed to promoting active and healthy lifestyle habits that will enable aging individuals to be able to live in their homes for as long as they desire and are able.** With the plethora of choices in foods and products that have filled the marketplace, it is important that information and education be made available to help seniors make wise choices and discern whether shrewdly marketed products are healthy, safe and effective. Millions of dollars are spent to create marketing campaigns to sell items that may be appealing because of their convenience or value, and those products may fill the belly, but be harmful to the health of the senior. Limited incomes and physical limitations often create a necessity for a person to look for foods that are economical and easy to prepare, but diabetes and obesity have run rampant as people choose to spend their money on convenient processed foods. Educational programs at our senior center have been effective in helping people read labels; try new foods; redesign recipes to cut fat, salt and sugar; and how to combine safe physical activity with food choices to maintain a healthy body and prevent disease. I feel that senior centers play a key role in providing useful information. Centers should also be encouraged to use technology

to communicate with seniors as computer literate generations move into the client base.

2. **The importance of the relational benefits of “food” should not be underestimated.** Throughout time, sharing a meal has been more than just satisfying the physical needs of the body. Many studies have been done that prove that there are social, as well as, physical advantages when people eat together. At our senior center, our transportation department helps by bringing people together to enjoy a meal, and most days an informative program. For those who are unable to attend the congregate meal, a host of dedicated volunteers provide daily contact when they take “home delivered meals” to seniors in our community. Volunteers are trained to spend a bit of time with the meal recipient and learn their name. Recipients report that they are very happy to have a visitor each day. Delivering meals to a senior’s home is a meaningful experience for our volunteers who themselves are over 60 years of age. They report feeling that they are making a difference in their direct contact with people who are in need. “Home delivered meals” and congregate dining are two of the most important and successful services that the senior center provides. However, it will be important to stay in tune with the changing tastes of the aging population. New forms of preparation and new types of food are being enjoyed by all ages, and the offerings at the senior centers/ nutrition sites, must be willing to provide foods that are desirable or seniors may not be apt to participate. Creative dieticians involved in the research and planning of meals will be increasingly important to meet the needs and desires of our aging and savvy consumers.
3. **The ability to obtain healthy foods is imperative.** Americans are independent! Everybody wants to drive, but for many, there comes a time when it is no longer appropriate to operate a vehicle. Many of our participants use our transportation network to travel to grocery stores and also to take advantage of government food surplus distributions. When the Ohio Farmers’ Market Senior Program is in progress, the transportation network brings seniors into the center to get their monthly coupon books. Funding for transportation to help seniors get their food is always needed - - and always runs short!

Nutrition and the transportation necessary to obtain healthy foods are the most basic needs of the elderly. As a senior center director I have learned that helping seniors live independent and active lives is our primary goal. If we can help seniors make healthy lifestyle choices they will live better and longer, and the community will be richer and stronger by their example.

I encourage the White House Council on Aging to continue to honor our mothers and fathers by providing resources that will enable them to “age well and live well”!